

# Object Summary

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## Oral history of the Malta Dockyard: Joe Meli

### Date

4 August 2021

### Primary Maker

Joe Meli

null

### Dimensions

1 hour 19 minutes 41 seconds

null

### Extent

1 digital audio recording (WAV)

### Object Type

Oral history

null

null

### Collection

Malta Dockyard Oral History project

### Museum

## Registration Number

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## Description

This recorded interview was made as part of the Malta Dockyard Oral History project by the Digitisation Unit, Heritage Malta, under the direction of Joe Meli. Joe Meli was awarded a yard apprenticeship following an examination in 1969 followed by a period working as a patternmaker. After further technical education overseas, he joined the New Building Projects and Estimating section up to his transfer to the Shiprepair Commercial section from where he resigned as the commercial manager in 2008 during the process of closing-down.

## Transcript / Summary

(This summary is a work in progress. Timings are approximate.) (00:30) Being that his father had also worked in the dockyard, it could have been the main reason why he was so interested and keen to work in the technical sector. When they finished primary school, they had to sit for an exam referred to as the 'Entrance Examination' before continuing to secondary school-the exam was a very important step at that age. He still recalls filling out the forms with his father and deciding on which school to go to, mainly Lyceum or Technical Schools, and then there were the private schools. He chose to go to technical school, even though at the time, such education was considered as a lower-level education, in comparison to studying to become a doctor or teacher. Entering the dockyard-Reasons for joining (03:00) He got good results and started his secondary education at Technical School at Paola, where he spent five years, where he studied woodwork, metalwork, science, and geography, etc., more technical subjects than academic subjects. On completion of the 5th form, he sat the GCEs. Although he obtained good results, the career opportunities were limited. The tendency was that if someone attended a technical school, the main opportunity was that of joining the dockyard. (03:45) His father worked in the dockyard but was employed with the Admiralty, as he was not transferred to Baileys when the shipyard was taken over by Bailey. He had some

cousins working there, so in a way he decided to follow in his family's footsteps. Sitting for the dockyard exam were about 300 other participants, out of which 50 were to be chosen, where he ranked 20th. The dockyard exam consisted of an IQ test, Aptitude test, and general knowledge test; when you pass the examinations, they did an interview and a medical test. (05:45) Once they are accepted by the dockyard, they grouped all the students, including their parents and they would choose the trade they wanted to pursue. The trades from which they could choose, are determined by how many people from each trade are needed at the time. When it was his turn to choose the trade he wanted, most were already taken so with his father's advice, he chose patternmaker-at the time of the Admiralty, this trade was considered as a very high-level trade and not everybody could do successfully. Education-Apprenticeship process (08:15) The Apprenticeship was five years. In their 1st year, they would learn something from all the main trades in the dockyard. Throughout the training of the trade, they also had to take theory lessons with lectures in the training centre and lectures in the technical institute. The learning system, was very different from secondary school. The instructors were much less refined compared to the school teachers, however most of what they taught used to be imprinted in one's mind. The teachings from the dockyard are useful in the sense that they come in handy later on in life and during your working life. (11:30) As a patternmaker, the next four years of apprenticeship were done at the boathouse, training on the trade with some periods (three to six months) at the foundry and machine shop. In Joe's case, he started the foundry training as soon as he finished from the training centre. Working in the foundry was a big difference, especially in the environment where they worked. On the other hand, the work they did there was very interesting because the foundry is where they created moulds from the patterns, and they would then pour molten metal in the moulds to create specific cast items such as valves, pumps, bollards and so on. (13:00) The relation of the foundry with patternmaking was because of the foundry works with wood patterns done by the patternmakers. Then in the foundry, they would use the pattern to create the empty mould in sand, which was then filled with molten metal. (13:30) They had also trained for some time in the machine shop learning to work on the lathes (torn) and milling machine. (13:45) During the following four years, they did lectures to prepare them for the city and guilds exam for engineering courses at MCAST (where now there is the

Junior College). He spent sometime in the drawing office as well but mainly he spent his apprenticeship at the pattern shop. The pattern shop was situated at the boat house, which was basically a large workshop for woodworkers. The front was open to the sea where the slipways were positioned. Entering the dockyard-Salaries, clocking in / out (15:30) At that time the shipyard worked on a shift system, although as apprentices were not allowed to work in shifts, so they did just the morning one which started at 6:30 am till 14:30 pm. This meant that one week would be a group of patternmakers and the following week would be another. Therefore, when assigned an instructor, they had two, due to the changing shifts-Guzeppi Camilleri (il-Mosti) and Guzeppi Formosa, who were like second fathers considering the care and responsibility they showed towards them. The instructor was there to show them the everyday work they had and help them while learning the job. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel)(18:00) As patternmakers, they did minor work using rubber, such as seals /rubber rings done on the lathe, making 'O' seals (which is a round piece of rubber, worked on the lathe and formed accordingly). They also worked on cork insulation for pipes.Re-wooding was also part of the patternmakers' job. This involved the renewal of the propellor shaft bearing, referred to as the stern tube. In those days this had wooden bushes (bearings), made of a specific wood called lignum vitae (lenju sant-some believed it was with what Christ' s cross was made of, which is not possible because of its weight). The re-wooding process consists of cutting the wood into strips, shaping them according to the diameter of the stern tube; then at the machine shop, they would make a mock-up of the stern tube, where the wooden strips are fitted and machined to size. Once machined, the patternmakers would mark and remove the wood strips and fit them in place on the ship. Entering the dockyard-Trades (From approval to the departure of a vessel)(23:00) The main job of a patternmaker was that of making patterns to form moulds for castings. There might be a drawing already made but one still had to make his own drawing of the pattern especially because they had to include the contraction (with a special contraction rule) to compensate the difference of size between the molten and the solidified state of the metal. The drawing would also indicate which parts are to be machined. They also had to draw and make core boxes; these boxes are there to form the hollow section of the object being made. The hollow section is referred to as a core,

which is made of sand, for example, if a pipe is being moulded, they would use the core box to make the hollow part of the pipe. Hence, they place the core into the mould, so that when they would pour the molten metal into the mould, it would take a cylindrical shape, round the core. Entering the dockyard-Salaries, clocking in / out (27:15) They had to use specific tools to carry out their job hence they were given these tools-half of it paid by the dockyard and half of it taken out of their salary; it cost around £16, which at that time was expensive, especially since the apprentice salary during the first year, was around £3.50 per week. Education-Employment pathways / local and foreign training opportunities (31:30) In 1974, there was the opportunity to go to Spain on a scholarship issued by the government to study Naval Architecture. The reason for this opportunity was because in Europe there was a sudden increase in the demand of new ships, especially for the bigger ships. The government of the time decided to construct a New Building Yard, taking the advantage of having already trained workers from the overmanned shiprepair yard. The government's plan at that time was for the country to become totally independent, and wanted to give the worker the necessary skills in new building of ships, with various discussions and arrangements with countries such as Yugoslavia, Russia, Germany, Spain, and other countries. (34:00) He applied for such a course and managed to get this opportunity, with another four students, all from the shipyard, to study Naval architecture. They were first sent to Madrid, where they were given a 6-week crash course, before attending the University. Even if they had learnt some basic Spanish, it was very hard for them to integrate when they arrived at the Naval university in Cadiz, because no one knew English there. (41:30) While they were in university, they had to study extremely hard, considering they also had that language barrier, which then became easier from their second year onward, especially since the teachings became more technical. The course took about three years, where they were awarded the proper qualification-in between they were given training in Malta and afterward they spent around six months training in the North of Spain. When he returned to Malta, he was given the position of Manager within the new building section. (47:15) In preparation for the Malta Shipbuilding, they were allocated to a small section within the dockyard, managed by the commercial manager (Charles Montefort), where they prepared quotations for off-shore vessels, ships, barges, etc. (49:15) At that time, there was a lot of pressure from the government to get works for the

shipyard and increase the work of the yard, as this was considered as one of the main foreign incomes for Malta. (51:45) In the new building, he worked till 1983, where he also visited countries such as Monaco and United States. They did negotiations with China as well, where he took care of the Chinese delegation that came to Malta to discuss the building of the China Supply Ships. He remembers people like Salvu Brincat, general manager, and Frans Spiteri, chairperson that he worked with. Joe respected very much these persons, and considers them as very knowledgeable about their work. (55:30) With the new building section they were two naval architects, and the shipyard required one of them to move with the shiprepair department. He joined the shiprepair estimating section in 1983. Education-Interesting training and skills(57:15) The work within the shiprepair estimating department was different from new building, and there was more pressure. In the estimating department, each person was responsible for different trades - hull, engineering, and electrical - so his main job was that of going abroad to assess ships with damage, repairs that were required for the preparation of the estimate and the final quotation. One vessel which left a huge impression was a cargo ship in Iran that was hit by a missile out at sea, in the accommodation section. He still remembers entering this dark section and seeing the inside burned down. Another one he recalls was in Bulgaria, a little after the Chernobyl disaster. He was involved in a lot of ship inspections on site that eventually came to the yard for repairs. (1:02:00) In 1987/88, he went to the London office (Marine Engineers Memorial Building), which was mainly a marketing and purchasing office. Furthermore, it was a communication office as well - the dockyard would send telexes there to be distributed accordingly to other countries. The London communication office was extremely important for the dockyard and it shows how important the dockyard was at the time. Education-Interesting training and skills(1:04:15) The telex system was similar to a typewriter, but each typed letter is outputted as a code on a punched paper tape. They would then put the tape in another sending machine to be sent accordingly. Afterwards, the fax machine was introduced - which for him was an amazing development where one could also send drawings which could not be done with a telex. Then followed by a computerised system. (1:06:00) After the London Office, Joe moved to the commercial division in 1989 as assistant commercial manager - travelling abroad for work. He stayed there till he finished from the dockyard in 2008, as

Commercial Manager. (1:07:00) The dockyard's main resource was the manual work done by its employees. Hence, when it came to selling, they were technically selling their manpower because where some companies were 80% material and 20% labour, the dockyard was the other way around. Furthermore, throughout the year they would have done work for various countries around the globe - around 32 different countries within a year. Safety-Accidents (1:09:30) In 1995, the Um El Faroud accident, apart from being a tragic event, also left a negative effect on the dockyard, the country, the authorities, and the labour force. People who worked there started to get aware of the dangers of the job. Something that before, was taken for granted. The Um El Faroud accident was kind of a wake-up call. Entering the dockyard-Swan Hunter / Bailey / changeovers (1:12:00) The process of downsizing. In 1997, the workers' council system was stopped. In 2003, the yard was divided in two sections: Enterprises and Shiprepair. Then it was changed again and the Malta Shipyards was formed combining the shiprepair yard and the newbuilding yard. There were a lot of changes going on mainly due to the various changes in political views within the country. (1:13:00) Although the shipyard was changing and passing through difficult times, we were still working and doing very complicated projects such as the ISIS Project (FPSO), the USA Naval vessel USS La Salle which came to the shipyard twice and we were very successful on both occasions where we obtained the highest performance rating by the US Navy. Then there was the Kashagan Barge 8, christened "Our Lady of Victory" . All these projects were very successful. Looking back-Reflections (1:16:15) He compares the dockyard to a small village and they had one objective, to sustain and do good within this village. If there is something wrong with the outcome, it means that the objective is not being reached accordingly. So, the workers within the dockyard, had to all work hand in hand to reach the objective because at the end of the day, if one of them has a different objective in mind, this will have a negative effect.